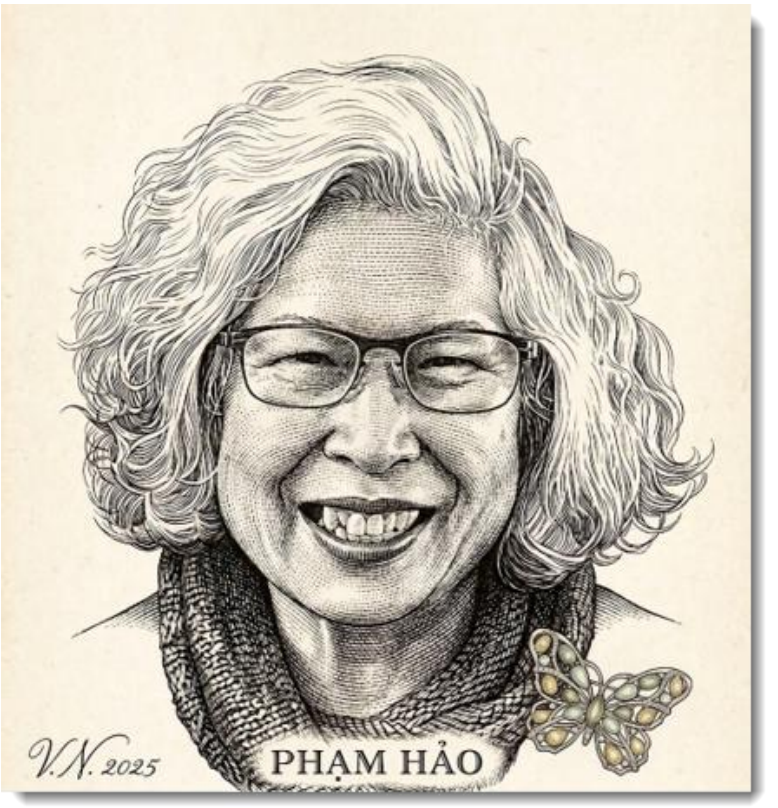
PHAM HAO

Dreams in Bloom

V.N.



A Friend I Have Never Met

Some friends enter our lives through their faces. We meet them, recognize them, and slowly become acquainted.

With others, we need a few meetings—sharing a cup of tea, a meal, a conversation—before we begin to discover their charm, their temperament, and their heart.

And then there are those rare friends who are stranger still: *people we have never met, yet somehow feel we have known for years*.

Pham Hao belongs to that third kind of friend for me.

I have never met her. I have never sat in her house on Queen Anne Hill overlooking Seattle. She has never taken me downstairs to see her trays of orchids growing under carefully controlled light and temperature. I have never stood on her balcony or in her three-level garden, watching orchids sway in the Northwest breeze. And yet, after reading her writing and receiving her emails, I have the curious feeling that I know something of the person behind the words.

Perhaps it is because, if we believe that "*writing style reveals the man*"[1]—or in this case, the woman, then Pham Hao's writing has done a remarkably honest job of introducing its author.

She is a woman who looks at life with tenderness. She knows how to care for plants and flowers, but also how to tend to memories. She can remember the impossibly long scientific name of an orchid species and, at the

[1] "Le style est l'homme même". (Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707–1788))

same time, never forget the taste of something her mother cooked long ago.

She lives in the Pacific Northwest, among Seattle, Lake Union, Leavenworth, Olympic National Park, and all the other landscapes of her adopted home. Yet somewhere in her mind there remains a corner of Vietnam that never completely disappears: family meals, sisters and old friends, childhood, the foods of home—and above all, the emotional traditions of a generation of Vietnamese who carried their homeland with them when they traveled far away.

Perhaps that is why, even though Pham Hao's world is set in a modern American city, there is always something unmistakably… Vietnamese about it.

Not Vietnam represented by a flag hanging in the yard. Not Vietnam proclaimed in grand declarations. Rather, Vietnam appears in a pot of orchids. A pot of lotus tea. A packet of sticky rice. A bowl of porridge. A platter of spring rolls. A story about sisters. An old friend. A memory suddenly awakened by a mountain landscape. And sometimes it appears in nothing more than a sentence: "If I get the chance, I'll go see it."

That is how Pham Hao enters life. Quietly. Without fanfare. Without declarations.

She is curious. She notices. She delights. And then she tells the story.

... From Florida to Seattle—Carrying an Entire Kingdom of Flowers

If someone asked me to choose an image that best represents Pham Hao, I would probably choose not a pen, but *an orchid*. Because orchids are not merely the subject of her writing. They are part of her life.

For ten years, she wrote one article every month for the *Vietnamese Orchid Network*. Readers of those articles may encounter long, difficult scientific names and detailed discussions of a plant's origins, light requirements, temperature, care, growing season, and blooming cycle.

But Pham Hao does not write about orchids like a botanist writing a scientific paper. She writes about orchids as if they were friends. One species has a hometown. Another has a personality. This plant tolerates the cold. That one loves sunshine. Yet another may look as though it has completely withered away, only to surprise its caretaker one season by suddenly bursting into bloom.

In her writing, science and affection travel side by side. A Latin name stands next to a Vietnamese one. A note about climate leads naturally into a family story. An orchid in bloom can summon memories of her mother, her sisters, her friends, or a meal from long ago.

Perhaps that is why people read Pham Hao not simply to learn about orchids. They read her *to discover a whole life blooming around them*.

When she moved from Florida to Seattle and brought along what amounted to an entire “fortune” in orchids, I thought: that is so very Pham Hao.

Most people move house carrying furniture and belongings. A devoted gardener may bring along a few treasured plants. But this woman seemed to bring an entire little kingdom with her.

From a warm, humid state to the much colder Pacific Northwest, with its completely different climate, she created a world on Queen Anne Hill where the plants that had traveled with her could continue to flourish.

There are blooming orchids in the living room.

Downstairs is the growing and propagation area, where temperature and light are carefully controlled.

Outside, on the balcony and throughout the multi-level garden, other plants are growing toward maturity.

Reading about all this, I do not picture merely a house. I picture something closer to *a tiny kingdom of flowers*. And what I love most about orchids is their beautiful paradox. Some stems look dry and thin, almost lifeless. You might think there is nothing left. Then, when the right season arrives, they suddenly produce flowers so extraordinary that even someone who knows nothing about orchids has to wonder: How can something so beautiful possibly come from a stem that looked so dead?

Someone once asked Pham Hao whether, on some moonlit night, she had ever seen a fairy emerge from her orchids.

I don't know how she answered. But after reading her work, I find myself thinking that perhaps she has never actually seen a fairy emerge from an orchid. What she certainly has done is look at life with the eyes of someone who believes that every flower contains a little bit of magic.

The opening pages about Pham Hao and her life make especially clear how closely she is connected to her orchids and to her home on Queen Anne Hill—a place where private life, orchid growing, and family memories seem to have become one.

And from that world, Pham Hao steps into literature. Or perhaps, more accurately, there is no clear boundary in her life between growing orchids and writing.

Both are ways of *nurturing something alive*.

... Four Stories—One Pham Hao World

The four pieces by Pham Hao in *Seattle, Forever Green* can certainly be read one at a time, but when they are placed beside one another, something interesting happens. They begin to resemble four windows opening in four different directions from the same house.

One window looks toward the water.

Another opens onto mountains, forests, and autumn.

A third looks toward a deep lake, a deep forest, and the memories of a human life.

And the last opens onto… a little roadside bookcase.

Yet no matter which window we look through, the person standing behind it is still Pham Hao.

A Pham Hao who loves flowers. Loves scenery. Loves books. Loves friends. Loves small things. And, above all, loves *the pleasure of discovering something unexpected in ordinary life*.

… "Sleepless in Seattle"—When a Floating House Becomes a Dream of Flowers

Of the four pieces, *Sleepless in Seattle* perhaps shows most clearly Pham Hao's ability to turn an ordinary outing into a journey of the imagination.

It begins simply enough. Her friend Helen buys a floating house on Lake Union and invites her over. But behind that invitation lies a little piece of movie history. For years, the author has been curious about the floating houses on Lake Union, especially the one that appeared in the movie *Sleepless in Seattle*.

And so a small journey begins.

One of the delightful things about Pham Hao is that she never seems to go anywhere empty-handed.

She brings food.

She brings her powers of observation.

She brings her associations and memories.

And, of course, in this particular case, she brings… orchids.

The drive down from Queen Anne Hill becomes an autumn passage of red and golden leaves.

Once she reaches the floating-house neighborhood, her eyes move from one house to another—from porches to potted plants to painted walls.

She doesn't merely “see.”

She *appreciates*.

Each house is judged by the writer’s very personal standards:

Which one is beautiful?

Which one is charming?

Which one would I buy immediately if I had the money?

Then she finds the house she likes best.

And, in a very Pham Hao way, the story slips from reality into dream.

That night she dreams.

In the dream, she becomes the owner of the house. But the house is no longer merely a house. The walls are covered with orchids. Friends appear. There are sisters. There is lake water. There are wooden frames filled with orchids. There is sticky rice and roasted chicken. There are autumn maple leaves. Everything that normally belongs to different parts of her life suddenly comes together in a single dream.

That is what I like most about this piece.

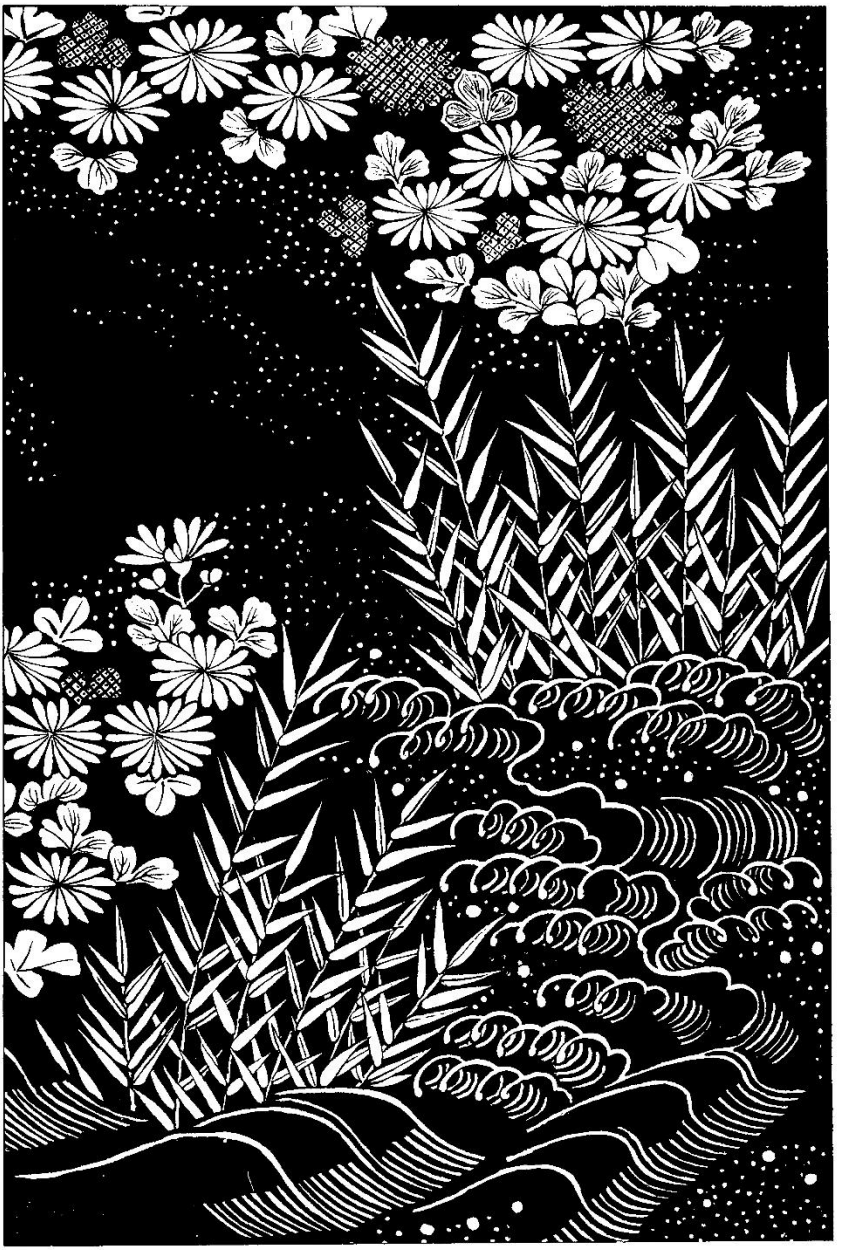
Pham Hao does not merely enter Seattle. She brings Seattle into her own private world. Lake Union is no longer simply Lake Union. It becomes "Pham Hao's Seattle." There are orchids. Vietnamese friends. Vietnamese food. Sisters. Dreams.

Reading this piece, I thought about one characteristic of literature written by people who have made their homes far from where they were born: a person may live in a new place for a very long time, but the imagination continues to carry along everything he or she has loved elsewhere.

That is why Pham Hao's Seattle is not quite the Seattle found in a travel guide.

It is Seattle with a little Florida, a little Vietnam, a little Melbourne, a little childhood, and a little family. And really, that is what makes it a writer's Seattle.

The visit to the floating houses begins with curiosity about the world seen in a movie. Gradually it becomes



an exercise in observation and enjoyment, and finally a dream in which an ideal home is filled with orchids, friends, and familiar food.

Artistically, *Sleepless in Seattle* has the natural structure of a personal essay.

It needs no complicated plot.

No dramatic climax.

Only the movement of a heart:

curiosity → encounter → observation → delight → dreaming.

And the dream at the end lifts the story from a travel sketch into a piece of literature.

"Leavenworth in Autumn"—Fall, Orchids, and the Laughter of Life

If *Sleepless in Seattle* is a piece about dreams, *Leavenworth in Autumn* is a piece about the appetite for life.

Pham Hao loves Seattle in the fall.

She loves the yellow leaves. The red leaves. The cool air. The sunny days. The pleasure of walking or riding a bicycle and finding a beautiful corner of nature to admire.

But what gives her writing its charm is not scenery alone. In Pham Hao's world, scenery always comes with everyday life.

If you want to go to a festival, you have to get up early. If you get up early, you have to prepare food. And

preparing food does not mean throwing a few things into a bag.

The sandwiches need butter, ham, pâté, pickles, cucumbers, cilantro, peppers… Then there is fresh fruit. Dried fruit. Chocolate. Drinks. Hot tea.

(At that point I suddenly thought: Maybe a Vietnamese person hasn't really gone on an outing until the food has been packed!)

Pham Hao tells these details so naturally that they never feel deliberately "realistic." Yet they are exactly what give her writing a human warmth.

Then autumn arrives.

The road to Leavenworth reminds her of the road from Saigon to Da Lat. This is a familiar reflex among Vietnamese living far from home: when we stand before a new landscape, we do not see it with our eyes alone. We also see it through the storehouse of our memories.

An American mountain can remind us of Da Lat. A German village can become the place where a Vietnamese family spreads out a picnic and eats *bánh mì*. A Seattle autumn can begin with a bowl of sticky rice and lotus tea. It is a meeting of several worlds.

But Pham Hao does not turn this into a philosophical argument.

She simply tells the story.

And precisely because she simply tells it, it feels true.

There is one particularly charming feature of this piece: Autumn never completely separates itself from orchids.

While other people are admiring the changing leaves, she is thinking about nighttime temperatures and the Dendrobiums growing outside. While enjoying the colors of fall, she is calculating when the orchids need to be brought indoors. The writer's autumn and the orchid grower's autumn become one.

That is a Pham Hao trademark.

She cannot completely go anywhere without taking her orchids along in her mind.

But for me, the funniest part of the piece comes at the end, with the story of the night-blooming cereus being given… Viagra.

Here we see another side of Pham Hao.

Not merely gentle.

Not merely dreamy.

But wonderfully playful.

A small incident. A friend's joke. And through Pham Hao's reaction, it becomes a wonderfully earthy ending.

After all the golden leaves, mountains, bicycles, chrysanthemums, and autumn orchids, the reader suddenly gets a good laugh.

That is the wisdom of a storyteller.

Not every essay about nature has to end with a philosophical sigh.

Sometimes a smile brings nature closer to us.

In this piece, autumn scenery, the trip to Leavenworth, family life, and orchid care continually weave in and out of one another. Then, unexpectedly, the ending turns to a humorous little story about the cereus plant.

It shows that Pham Hao's voice is not merely gentle.

It has charm.

And it knows how to laugh at itself.

“Lake Crescent”—Deep Water, Deep Forest, and the Human Heart

Of the four pieces, *Lake Crescent* may be the most layered.

It begins with a camping trip, but within that trip many different worlds meet. Botany. Travel. History. A murder story. *Lamartine*. Orchids. Family. Friends. Food. Childhood. And finally, a story about the happiness of a woman.

If one simply summarized the plot, one might think there are too many stories in it. But that “too many stories” quality is actually the natural structure of memory. Real life does not move in neat chapters.

A trip to Lake Crescent may begin with looking for orchids.

Then someone tells a murder story.

Then you look at the moon over the lake.

Then you remember Lamartine.

Then you go looking for driftwood.

Then you discover traces of the history of an old railway line.

Then you remember home.

Then you return home and meet your friends.

That is how memory works. One image leads to another. One story calls another story back.

What is most striking is that orchids remain the hidden thread running through the piece.

The author goes into the mountains and forests hoping to find wild orchids. She brings her knowledge. She brings books. She brings her excitement. But she does not find them.

And that failure to find them is meaningful, too.

In Pham Hao's writing, nature does not always give human beings what they want.

Some orchids appear only in the distance.

Sometimes you can see something but cannot reach it.

Sometimes you want something but cannot take it.

There are beautiful pieces of driftwood that you would love to bring home, but must quietly ask yourself whether you really should.

Some things can only be looked at.

Perhaps that is why beauty becomes even more precious.

Yet the part that moved me most was not Lake Crescent itself. Not the story of the body beneath the lake. Not even the moonlight. It was the story of Mai.

After all the mountains, forests, and water, Pham Hao returns to something profoundly human: the happiness of an old friend.

This friend had endured a difficult marriage, then lost her husband, and finally found what the Vietnamese call a *clear and peaceful harbor*.

The author sees her friend lying in a rattan chair, wrapped in a blanket, watching a movie with a smile on her face.

It is only a small scene but Pham Hao sees an entire lifetime in it. She is so happy for her friend, and so touched by her happiness, that she almost cries.

I think that sentence tells us a great deal about the writer. Pham Hao possesses a kind of affection that is never loud, but runs deep. She can write at length about food, orchids, plants, roads, and scenery. But when she touches the happiness of a friend, her prose suddenly becomes quiet.

There is no need for a lecture about the fate of women.

No need for a philosophy of happiness.

All she has to do is look at a friend who, late in life, has finally found a peaceful place to lean on.

That is enough.

Lake Crescent begins as a search for wild orchids, expands into the beauty and mysterious depth of the lake, moves through layers of memory and association, and eventually returns to friendships and the story of a

woman who has finally found a simple, peaceful happiness.

If I had to choose one word to describe the piece, I would choose *depth***.**

Lake Crescent is deep.

Memory is deep.

Friendship is deep.

A human life is deep.

Look at the surface of a lake and you may see only moonlight. But beneath that surface lies an entire hidden world.

Pham Hao's writing can be like that, too.

On the surface, it is simply a story about a trip. Read more closely, and beneath it you discover a rich emotional life.

"The Little Roadside Library"—A Bookshelf and the Human Instinct to Make Friends

If the first three pieces contain lakes, mountains, forests, and autumn, *The Roadside Library* begins with something very small: a little bookcase.

But that is sometimes where the magic of literature lies. A person who knows how to look can turn a little roadside bookcase into an entire world.

Pham Hao calls the Little Free Libraries “Tiny Libraries.” When she wants a more poetic name, she calls them “Roadside Libraries.”

I prefer the second.

“Roadside” has a certain poetry to it. It makes us think of chance encounters.

Someone is walking.

Suddenly, there are books.

The person stops.

Opens the little cabinet.

Takes out a book.

And life turns in another direction.

Perhaps that is why this piece, when you think about it, is not really about books. It is about encounters.

A stranger encounters a book.

A stranger encounters another person who loves books.

A homeowner looks through the window and sees a regular visitor coming to borrow a book—and smiles.

One book leads to another.

A person out for a walk suddenly sits down on

someone's front step and reads several dozen pages.

That is a very small society. There is no organization. No paperwork. No library card. No late fee. Yet it possesses something modern society sometimes lacks: *trust*.

Put books outside so that anyone who wants one can take it. Read it and return it if you wish. Don't return it if you don't. Someone gives. Someone else receives. And perhaps, another day, someone brings another book.

Pham Hao likes these little libraries because she is a bookworm but I think she likes them for another reason as well. She likes the feeling that life still contains places where freedom and kindness can exist. One particularly delightful detail is that Pham Hao can be walking down the street, discover a book she finds irresistible, and simply sit down on someone's front step to read it.

It is a lovely image.

And it fits perfectly with the portrait of her that I have formed through her writing: When she encounters something she loves, she stops. She looks carefully. She takes her time. She enjoys it fully.

She sees an orchid—she stops to admire it.

She sees a beautiful house—she dreams.

She sees autumn leaves—she walks.

She sees a book—she sits down and reads.

That is a philosophy of life never proclaimed as a philosophy, yet present in everything she writes.

This piece also reveals another side of Pham Hao: she enjoys mysteries, detective stories, and scary tales.

I find that detail particularly endearing because it breaks the overly “gentle” image one might otherwise have of a woman who spends her days growing orchids, drinking tea, and admiring autumn leaves.

No.

At night, this same woman may curl up with a horror novel and read until her eyes can barely stay open.

That is a complete human being. And it is also one of the charms of Pham Hao's writing: she does not try to construct a portrait of “the writer.”

She simply lives.

Then she tells us about it.

In *The Roadside Library*, the little bookcases become meeting points—small islands of freedom within a community.

From choosing books and meeting people on the street to chatting with the owners of the bookcases, the essay grows into a story about the love of reading and the unexpected friendliness that can exist among strangers.

I especially love the image of the bookcase owner looking through the window, seeing Pham Hao come for a book, and smiling.

One writer.

One reader.

One bookcase.

One road.

That is enough to create a community.

Perhaps literature, at its most beautiful, asks for nothing more.

Pham Hao's Writing—A Voice That Smells Like Home

After reading these four pieces, I think several qualities of Pham Hao's writing become quite clear.

First: She knows how to tell a story.

She does not invent artificial drama. Life gives her something, and she tells it.

But what matters is that she knows how to choose the telling detail.

A tray of food. A doorstep. A flowerpot. A rattan chair. A friend's remark. A pink house. A cereus plant. A bookcase. These details give the world she describes a life of its own.

Second: Her writing is rich in the senses.

The reader sees color*: red, yellow, green, pink, orange*… But the reader also smells things. Tea. Wood smoke. Food. And one can almost taste the dishes she describes.

Perhaps that is the gift of someone who truly loves the physical world in the best sense of the word: she understands that life is made not only of ideas, but also of color, fragrance, temperature, food, and light.

Third: She knows how to bring knowledge into literature without turning literature into a research paper.

Orchids are the obvious example.

Scientific names appear, but soon the story returns to ordinary life. History may enter the picture, but then there are friends. *Lamartine* may appear, but afterward we are back in the kitchen, with family and food.

The "research" in Pham Hao does not stand by itself. It dissolves into the "rambling."

Fourth: Her writing has heart.

This may be the most important quality of all.

Affection for plants. Affection for friends. Affection for sisters. Affection for her mother. Affection for the old homeland. Affection for women of her generation.

Even when she tells the story of a stranger, she has the ability to make that stranger feel like someone we know.

A woman who shares her love of books talks with her for only a few minutes, and afterward they feel as though they have been close friends for years.

I read that sentence and thought: Perhaps that is how Pham Hao makes friends, too.

A Friend from Another Generation Whom I Have Never Met

I have quite a few friends from generations older than mine.

Perhaps there has always been a little “old soul” in me, so I sometimes find it surprisingly easy to connect with people considerably older than I am.

But my friendship with Pham Hao is unusual in another way. It is a friendship that has never included a

handshake. We have never sat across from each other. We have never shared a cup of tea. We have never shared a meal. And yet her emails always leave me with a warm feeling.

Some letters are perfectly written. Polite. Complete. Everything is said correctly. And yet, when you finish reading them, nothing remains.

Pham Hao's emails are different.

When you finish reading one, you can still feel a person on the other side. There is gentleness. There is sincerity. There is a natural concern for others.

I think part of the reason is that she writes the way she speaks.

She does not pose.

She does not manufacture a literary voice.

She does not try to prove that she is a writer.

She simply tells a story.

And the reader hears the voice of a human being.

Perhaps that is why, although I have never met her, I still believe that “writing style reveals the person” is especially true in Pham Hao's case.

If someday I have the opportunity to visit Seattle and climb Queen Anne Hill to see her, I probably won't be surprised by what I find.

I imagine walking into the living room.

I see orchids.

Lots of orchids.

Some are blooming.

Others have dry-looking stems, and I wonder how she can possibly be so fond of them.

Then she will point out a particular flower and tell me its scientific name.

I'll try to remember it. And I will certainly forget. But I may remember something else.

I will remember the sight of a flower so beautiful that it seems almost impossible—a flower growing from a stem that looked as though it had already died.

And I will think of Pham Hao's writing. Her literature has that same simple magic.

From the smallest things in life—a floating house, a trip to see autumn leaves, a lake, a camping trip, a roadside bookcase, an old friend, a meal, a dream—she can make something bloom.

Not enormous flowers. Not flowers that require us to stand far away and look up at them in awe but flowers close at hand. Flowers in the garden. Flowers on the balcony. Flowers in the living room. Flowers of memory. Flowers of friendship. Flowers of a life that knows how to love ordinary things.

Someone once asked Pham Hao whether, on some moonlit night, she had ever seen a fairy emerge from her orchids.

I don't know but after reading her writing, I think the question should perhaps be changed a little.

Not:

“Have you ever seen a fairy emerge from an orchid?”

But rather:

“Do you realize that, because of people like you, sometimes someone who has never met you can still believe that there are secret gardens in this world, houses filled with flowers, friendships that begin before people ever meet, and dreams that remain forever green—like Seattle?”

And if Pham Hao merely smiles and says nothing, I won't be surprised. A person who grows orchids probably understands this better than anyone: Some of the most beautiful things in life do not need to be explained.

They only need time.

Care.

And then, one day, in the right season—*they bloom.*